



Letters

Configurations

To the Editor:

I have just read, with dismay, Robert Bly's dyspeptic comments on "Configurations," by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz. They reveal more than most readers would care to know about your reviewer. Unfortunately, they tell us next to nothing about his ostensible subject.

The importance of Paz cannot be diminished by Bly's obtuseness—but it is hard for an admirer of his poetry not to express indignation. I leave it to the numerous American poets who have stated their indebtedness to Paz to reveal how seriously they plan to take Bly's warning about being "retrapped in Spanish-American literary stage sets . . ."

Paz is the least bound of any poet to the mannerisms of any one country or civilization . . . The poetry he wrote while he lived in India (generously represented in "Configurations") is certainly not bound by the "Spanish-American modernism" Bly pokes fun at.

Paz, in fact, is not only unusually well-read in Indian, Chinese and Japanese poetry—but has made these traditions living parts of his own verse . . . Bly, obviously, distrusts literary experimentation. To judge by this review, he disapproves of any poetry that does not emanate "from the gut."

He is, of course, entitled to his prejudices. In my opinion, they disqualify him as a reviewer of a poet who—whatever he may say—is "really thinking" when he writes . . . and thinking on a scale that should have moved Bly to respectful silence.

DONALD KEENE
New York City.

Mr. Bly replies:

I understand very well the opinions that people like your correspondent have about Paz. That is precisely why I agreed to undertake the review.

Establishment types like Mr. Keene, who know very little about South American literature, will choose one well-groomed poet like Paz (ignoring entirely such poets as Salvador Novo, or Lihn or Cardenal or Villaurrutia, or older men like Velarde). Then, carrying Paz

aloft as a token Latin-American, they stampede toward the Desert of Opinions . . . Of all the poets in Latin America, why do the university types always choose Paz? It's even poor scholarship.

Octavio Paz is interesting in his prose. In his poetry, he's sometimes experimental, most often merely feeble. I respect Keene's translations from the Japanese—but, as a critic of poetry, he's the sort of genial elephant who loves to hold the tail of the elephant before him.

Whitewash

To the Editor:

In his review of Harold Weisberg's "Frame-Up," John Kaplan quotes the author on a tangential subject . . . the treatment of Weisberg's previous book ("Whitewash") in The Washington Post.

"I know," said Weisberg, "that its book reviewer was ordered not to review 'Whitewash' after he had read it and decided on a favorable review."

I was the Post's book reviewer when "Whitewash" (about the Warren Commission's investigation of the Kennedy assassination) was published. The above-quoted sentence—which contains four falsehoods—goes a long way toward explaining why Weisberg's serial revelations and zealous certitudes have been so skeptically received by serious men.

(1) I did not decide on a "favorable review" of "Whitewash." (2) I did not plan any review of "Whitewash" because (3) I never read more than a few pages of the thing. Thus, (4) I was never "ordered not to review it." In fact, during the five years I worked for The Post, I was never "ordered not to review" any book.

It is tiresome to have to remind Mr. Weisberg in print of what I told him in person—when he hand-delivered "Whitewash" to my office, during the season when conspiracy-hobbyists were in full cry. . . . I decided, in agreement with my editors, to leave the consideration of books about the Kennedy assassination to reviewers better qualified to judge their merits. I disqualified myself because I am ignorant of the fine points of criminal law (as ignorant as is Mr. Weisberg, in your reviewer's opinion of him).

There were many commentators willing and able to attend such books—either in The Post's daily columns or in its Sunday book supplement. My editors were as pleased to slip me off the hook as I was pleased to be off it.

GEOFFREY WOLFF
Princeton, N. J.

The Performing Self

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on an analysis of the attitudes implicit in much of the "restrictive or deflationary" contemporary rhetoric which discusses the problems of youth, and which the young are often performing against. (Writings by Benjamin DeMott, Zbigniew Brzezinski and George Kennan are particularly scrutinized.) Poirier argues that the peculiar strength of youth is its "freedom from believing that the so-called 'necessities' of life and thought are in fact necessities," and that we should respect the creative potential of this attitude.

One does not have to agree with everything in the essay to appreciate that it is the work of a sympathetic intelligence far removed from mere fashion-following. I do agree with Poirier when he goes on to show that academic discourse can be dangerously self-limiting, that we should beware of compartmentalizing our vocabularies, that we should, for example, be able to move from talking about Shakespeare to discussing our pleasure in the Beatles without feeling that we are indulging in a sort of lexical slumming (his long essay on the Beatles, if a little inflationary, is by way of being something of a tour de force).

At times elusive and intentionally provocative, Poirier is everywhere invigorating and challenging. Both in the academy and in society at large, his argument is against fixity and for fluidity, dislocation, a continuous reinvention of the forms by which we live (and teach). To meet the challenge of youth "the universities need to dismantle their entire academic structure." There must be a "rebellion against the disorder we call order."

Subtlety and intelligence are manifest on every page—I do however have a few questions. I finished the book, for instance, still not quite sure just how radical Poirier is in his politics, as opposed to his cultural attitudes. Does he want all the academic structures dismantled now? Violently? Does nothing good come down to us through (and only through) the structures of the past? If many are deadening, as they surely are, are not some of them liberating? Is a university system which produced a mind as intelligent as Mr. Poirier's all bad? (I am not contesting the vital need for flexibility and innovation.) His eloquent plea on behalf of the young is timely, and it is certainly true that we older people and teachers have a great deal to learn from them. On the other hand, to what ex-

tent, I wonder, does Poirier feel that the young have little to learn from their seniors?

"A characteristic of death is conformity; a characteristic of life is the disruption of conformity"—his assertion is very American and in some senses importantly true. But in all? Are there not some disruptions which can be wasteful, even deadly? (Is not cancer a kind of disruption?) Are there not some patterns that help to give some shape or at least efficiency to our daily lives? (I had a student once who complained that because the books in the library were arranged by sub-

ject and in alphabetical order, his mind was being subtly tyrannized. Would a complete randomness of organization be more liberating?)

But these are matters for discussion. The important thing is that Poirier is raising important questions and proposing new perspectives. I believe that he puts his emphases in the right places, and that his new book will prove invaluable stimulating to anyone interested in contemporary literature, teaching and society. It is itself an impressive performance by one of the most original of our contemporary critics. ■



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